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REMINISCENCES OF THE CIVIL WAR BY A
CONFEDERATE STAFF OFFICER*

(SIXTH PAPER)

RECONSTRUCTION DAYS IN THE SOUTH

One evening in February of the late winter of 1864, on returning to camp near Petersburg after a hard day's work, I found my tent occupied by a man who had taken possession of my bed and was covered up in my blankets. I asked the servants the meaning of it, and they said he merely asked for Major Ranson's tent and forthwith took possession. On examination I found that he was a youth about sixteen years old, very red in the face, and in a stupor. I thought he must have been drinking, but there was no smell of liquor about him. Failing to arouse him I sent for Dr. Gild, medical director, who after examination pronounced him sober but in typhoid fever. Here was a predicament; but Dr. Gild aroused him enough to learn that he was my nephew, John Washington, whom I had not seen since he was four years old, and that he had run away from his home in California to join the Southern Army, crossing the plains mainly on foot and taking six months in the journey. Then he lapsed into unconsciousness.

In this dilemma I went to General Lee for advice. He said promptly, "Enlist him in some battery, and then Dr. Gild can send him to the hospital in Petersburg." Six weeks after that John appeared again at my camp. He went to the hospital a chubby boy, but was now a tall, gaunt man, as weak as a child and as hungry as a hawk. As my ration was hardly sufficient for me, I could not feed him, and in my second dilemma I went again to General Lee. He said as promptly as before, "Leave his name and company with me and I will order him to report to you for duty as courier." So as John had no horse he became my courier on foot, the only one of the kind I have ever

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heard of, and developed an immense capacity for eating and sleeping. A young man who had walked a long distance to fight must have had in him the stuff of which soldiers are made, but as the surrender occurred about two weeks after John came out of the hospital, he must have felt that he had "paid too dear for his whistle."

When the surrender came I exchanged my watch for a horse for John, and he made the march with me from Appomattox to my home in the Valley. In passing through Rappahannock county, I stopped one day under the shade of a tree to rest, while John went on to the village to get a shoe put on his horse. Shortly I heard the clattering of hoofs, and looking down the road saw him coming at full speed, waving over his head a hand-bill announcing the death of Lincoln, and shouting, "Hurrah, hurrah, old Abe is dead, old Abe is dead!" I shut him up in a very peremptory manner, telling him that he was endangering his life and mine, should any Union man or soldier hear him; that the Northern people would be looking for some object upon which to take their vengeance for the murder, and to suspect would be equivalent to conviction. Besides, I told him that the South had lost her best and most powerful friend, and that we now had only General Grant to depend on for our safety.

It was only a few days after the surrender of General Lee that I had set out for my home near Charlestown in the Valley of Virginia. The distance was two hundred miles and the journey had to be made across the country. I formed a mess with Colonel Osman Latrobe of Baltimore and Colonel Fairfax of Loudon county, both officers of Longstreet's staff.

General Grant had allowed us a wagon and team, and one or two other soldiers went with us. Under the terms of the surrender all officers kept their horses and side-arms. Our route was through Buckingham, Albemarle, Green, Madison, Rappahannock, and Fauquier counties to Loudon. At Upperville I parted from them and went alone across to Shenandoah, to Clarke, and thence to Jefferson county, my home.

When I arrived at my home, three miles west of Charlestown, on the Berryville turnpike, I hardly recognized it. The fences were all gone, the timber had been cut down, and I rode in be-

tween the naked gate-posts. In the road, where there was a deposit from freshets, my four children were playing in the sand. None of them knew me, and when I took them up in my arms and kissed them, they silently stared at me as at a stranger.

As I rode in I read upon the gate-posts a notice that all returning officers and soldiers should report to Major Wilder, provost marshal at Charlestown, and that they were forbidden to wear their uniforms. I had no clothes except those I wore, and after my wife had ripped off the gold lace from my sleeves and the stars from my collar, I rode into Charlestown. As I was riding down the street, two men, citizens of the town, ran up and took hold of my bridle. Calling two soldiers and a sergeant, they directed attention to my uniform, and I was arrested and carried to Major Wilder's headquarters at the Carter House.

Major Wilder was engaged for some time, and I stood waiting with my captors. When he was disengaged he turned to us and asked, "Well, what is this man here for?" One of the citizens said, "He is wearing his uniform contrary to your orders. He is the Rebel Ranson and ought to be in jail." Major Wilder turned to me and asked, "Why have you done this?" I replied, "Major Wilder, I returned home yesterday and read your orders on the gate-posts of my home that I must report to you. My wife took from my uniform all insignia of rank, and I have worn it because I either had to do so or come naked, as these are all the clothes I have in the world."

Instantly he turned upon my captors and said, "You people have given me more trouble than anybody else. You have been too mean to fight on your own side, and too cowardly to fight on ours, and are perfectly content to follow the mean occupation of spies and informers. My soldiers will carry out my orders, not you; and if you dare come here again on any such errand as this I will put you in the jail." Then turning to the soldiers he said, "You see this man; then remember he is privileged to wear his uniform where he damn pleases, and you will so inform both officers and men on guard." When they left the room, I thanked him and was going out when he said, "Don't go; I want to have one bully good drink with you." And opening the door into the next room, we had the drink all right.

Twenty-five years afterward I told the story to a party of men who were dining with me at the Maryland Club in Baltimore, where I was then living. It was then arranged that I should find out where the Major was and invite him to Baltimore, where he was to be my guest at a dinner I would give him, these same men to be present. But on making inquiry from the War Department at Washington I learned that Major Wilder was dead.

I may here remark that, except on the battlefield, I have never had any trouble with the soldiers of the Union Army who did the fighting. My troubles have all been with citizens who stayed at home and did the talking, or with barrack soldiers who never fired a gun. The trouble is that the people who talked and wrote, in the North as well as in the South, brought on the war, and when the war came these two classes of people continued to talk and to write, and took no part in the fighting, and after the war was over continued talking and writing, inflaming men's minds and preventing and delaying all efforts at reconciliation. If the people in the North had known the true conditions in the South the war might have been averted. But being ignorant of the true conditions, and reading and hearing the conditions from theorists and fanatics, a calm and quiet consideration of the subject was impossible. I believe that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had as much to do with the coloring of the picture and inflaming of the minds of the people as any one thing, and possibly more; and yet I have heard that Mrs. Stowe said (when she had lived in the South after the war and had learned the true conditions) that "if she had known as much before the war as she knew now, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* would never have been written."

The reconstruction period in our part of the country was not as bad as in many places further south, but it was bad enough. In the first place all soldiers of the Southern Army and all sympathizers were denied the ballot. In my precinct at Charlestown, where six hundred ballots were cast before the war, eleven men only voted, nine of these being office-holders. The country, the railroads, everything was in the hands of the U. S. Government. At Charlestown the railroad depot was in the hands of a sergeant. The administration of the law was in the hands of a provost marshal and his wretched, drunken, undisci-

plined soldiers. Major Wilder and his real soldiers had gone, and had been replaced by the scum of the army who had never seen a battle.

After a few days at home I found that the overseer on the farm had hidden some wheat in our house. He could not leave it in the barn, for it would have been seized. I knew that the house would be overrun with vermin, and besides, we wanted money. I could not sell it to our people, for they had no money, and so I determined to ship it to Baltimore. Accordingly I went to the sergeant at the depot and asked him to get me a car, and he did so. When I took the wheat to the car he refused to let me load it unless I paid him ten dollars for getting the car, and after it was loaded, he refused to let it go forward until I had paid him five cents a bushel. When I objected, he said he did not care, he would sell it to the first man that came along and get his five cents a bushel, and I could whistle for the balance. I knew he would sell it to some Union man who would refuse to pay me on the ground that it was Government property; so I had to borrow the money and pay the man much more than the whole railroad charges to Baltimore. This was merely a sample of what was going on everywhere, and in every transaction blackmail and swindling were the rule, not the exception.

I had never sold but one negro in my life and had never bought one. The man I sold had run away and had been brought back. I told him if he would promise to remain at home, I would keep him, but if he ever ran away again, I would sell him. There was a sort of unwritten law that when a slave ran away and was caught and brought back, he should be sold. There were two reasons for this: first, it was a warning to others not to run away; and, second, the men who captured the slaves claimed a reward of one fourth the value of the slave, and a sale at public auction was the only sure way of arriving at the amount of the reward. Pennsylvania slave-catchers made large sums in the business.

This negro promised to stay, but ran away again, and I sold him, thus angering him and his family. One day as I was riding into Charlestown I stopped at a stream one hundred and fifty yards from the outskirts of the town to water my mare. While she was drinking, a shot was fired and a bullet whistled

near my head. My mare threw up her head and trembled. She had often heard the sound before. I composed her and she went on drinking. I was looking towards the town, when I saw a puff of smoke from the back board fence of a cabin, and the bullet entered the water not three inches from the mare's nose. Gathering up my reins, I rode at the spot and discovered my man Gabe behind the fence, trying to reload his army rifle; but I was too quick for him. Covering him with my pistol, I made him hand me his gun, butt foremost, and marched him off to a magistrate. This officer, however, was a miserable creature, and turned him loose to find bail. Of course he got no bail and did not come back.

One evening as I was riding home I passed two negroes in the U. S. uniform, armed with guns. After I had passed them they fired two shots which came very near me. I turned and rode at them and took their guns away from them. It was almost dark and there was no use taking them before the magistrate; so I let them go, but took the guns home. The next day they came to me with an order from the provost marshal, stating that if I did not give the guns to them he would arrest me, and if I ever dared again to interfere with loyal soldiers of the U. S. he would have me shot. These men were relations of my man Gabe, and wished to punish me for the sale of Gabe.

I cite these occurrences as indications of the general situation in Jefferson county. Everybody was having similar experiences; they were not confined to me. It was like living in an enemy's country, only worse. Your enemy may oppress you, but he is not always a robber. These people put over us by the Government had no other idea but the getting of money out of the men who had fought in the Southern Army.

One day a man in U. S. uniform came to me, claiming that I owed him a tax of more than \$2,000. I had no money and could not sell land, which was all the property I had, because of the fear that the Government would confiscate and annul any title I might give. The claim was held over me, but the amount was reduced gradually to \$1,200. Finally I settled with my tormenter, a Federal officer, for \$250, and soon afterwards found out that I need not have paid him anything. The law he was

acting under was unconstitutional, and had been repealed long before. How much money was filched from my poor neighbors I do not know, but no one thought of contesting the authority of a man in Government office. The fear of his vengeance was too great; not fear for themselves only, but fear for their families, especially for the women and children.

And then there were the returning negro soldiers, the wards of the Government, the delightful pets of the Republican party. Everything they did was beautiful. Their drunkenness was beautiful, their swaggering airs and loud profanity were delightful, and if they insulted a Southern man or woman, that was especially delightful. Looking back, I am inclined to think that the negroes were a thousand times better than their white Republican friends. They were very moderate when their ignorance, their opportunities, and their temptations are considered. Even now it is enough to bring a shudder to any man who knew those times, merely to imagine what they might have done.

And a Rebel had no standing in court. A man who had clung to the Union side during the war took in a portion of my land adjoining his, building a strong stone fence around it. My lawyer told me I could do nothing, for he himself could not get a license to practice, and I had no standing in court.

Once a party of Federal soldiers rode up to my house. I went out and asked them what they wanted. They said they had been looking at the outside of the Southern people's houses during the war, and now wished to see the inside in a social way, for they had heard there were some portraits and family relics of interest they would like to see. I imprudently said that I had neither the means nor the disposition to entertain them, and of course they made me suffer for it.

There were some outrages which were matters of common knowledge, but I fear there were some which were known only to the principals. Some years after the war an intimate friend of mine told me in confidence something that happened to him which he had never told anyone. He was in his country town on business and it was late in the evening, about dusk, when he learned that there was a lady looking for an escort to her home. As her home was near his, he offered his services. They were

on horseback and rode out of the town together. A pass was required to get into the town as well as one to get out of it. They were stopped by the outpost guard while their passes were examined. An officer came to help in the examination with a lantern. He seemed to be quite under the influence of liquor. He told my friend that his pass was all right, but that he would have to detain the lady. My friend remonstrated, but the officer called some of his men and told them to escort him out of camp. The last glimpse he got of the lady was as the officer was leading her horse into his camp.

She was a young married woman of as good family as any in the country and very pretty. What happened no one ever learned, but I know that her husband took his own life shortly afterward. My friend said that as the woman was led off she never spoke one word; she seemed to have been stricken dumb with terror. As her horse was being led away she turned to look at him and the expression of agony in her face, he declared, would haunt him as long as he lived. She did not reach her home until the next day, and the subject has never been mentioned between them since, though they were neighbors and friends and connections by marriage.

While I have thought I should, after writing of the war, say some words concerning the reconstruction period, yet I must not dwell on it. It remains to me as a hideous nightmare, yet a dreadful reality to those who suffered. It was disgraceful to the perpetrators and will ever remain a blot upon the escutcheon of the authorities at Washington. In the effort at reconciliation between the North and South, the memory of those days stands now as the most effective barrier. There are some things which can never be forgiven by mortal men, and some of these things had their existence in the days of reconstruction. It is idle to say that forgiveness and forgetfulness have pervaded the Southern mind. The days of reconstruction will be had in remembrance long after the sound of battle and the smoke have rolled away into the "land where all things are forgotten." That peace and prosperity have returned to us and have blotted out much of the sectional feeling is a blessed fact, but as long as the world lasts the reconstruction period will be remembered.

In our section of the country, as I have said, the conditions were not as bad as they were further south, and we recovered some of our rights as citizens long before the extreme South got back any of theirs. The South was in the hands of the negroes under the guidance of the carpet-bagger, backed by the Government at Washington and the soldiers of the U. S. Army. The Constitution had been boldly set aside and we had a government of force without regard to law. Trials by jury, which were expressly provided for every citizen by the Constitution as his right, gave place to trials by commission.

In a time of profound peace, when every man in the South had laid down his arms and submitted himself to the will of the conqueror, men were arrested, brought before these commissions, and deprived of life and liberty. There was no law for the appointment of these commissions, there was no law for the powers exercised by them. All their acts were illegal, their very existence was illegal, and yet they were created by a government whose every official was sworn to obey the Constitution and laws. Under this same U. S. Government the state governments were usurped by a wretched lot of carpet-baggers with negroes as the voters. Under the protection of the general government and backed by U. S. soldiers, the halls of the legislatures were filled with ignorant negroes, the executive offices being reserved for the carpet-bagger. Under this new rule the treasury of every Southern state was looted. Hundreds of millions of state bonds were issued and sold, the proceeds going directly into the pockets of the carpet-bagger.

Elections were a mere farce when the returns were under the control of commissions appointed for the purpose of falsifying the returns. Even the U. S. Government finally took a hand in the electoral commission business, and the presidency was stolen from Tilden and given to Hayes.

That the South survived these conditions and was able to resume her place among the states was evidence of a courage and endurance which guarantees her future. She passed through the fire, the dross perished, and only the pure gold was left.

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